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Communication Skills

BE CONSTRUCTIVE, NOT DESTRUCTIVE

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Throughout the day, you greet people, have conversations, and attend meetings. Every communication impacts you in some way, either adding value to you or depleting you. Communication is an extremely potent personal power and you need to learn to use it wisely.

For instance, do your conversations make you feel good or bad? Are they positive or negative? And when they are negative, do you know how to stop it and turn it around so that it becomes constructive? A client recently admitted: Twenty minutes she went on and on. I didn't know how to stop her but I could feel the life force draining from me as she spoke. I was frozen. Paralyzed. And all I could do was pray she would stop and that the conversation would end.

A nurse manager reported: We are working at 110% capacity in the hospital. At a recent meeting, my director basically spent the time complaining about how stressful it has been for her. She allowed others to go on and on complaining. Nothing was accomplished. I can't even tell you the purpose of the meeting. All I know is that I felt as though she was wasting our time as well as company resources. And this is supposed to be my mentor? Nearly all of the 50 managers were in this gripe session. There were so many other things I could have completed and would have preferred to do!

Can you relate to this client? Have you ever spent hours of your day in meetings where people spent the entire time arguing, complaining, or blaming and nothing got accomplished? How do you feel during and after one of these meetings?

The Full Extent Of The Problem

Destructive conversations, as I call them, include blaming, complaining, gossip, and negativity. They are destructive because they damage and deplete your life force. They tear you down, beat you up and spit you out. Destructive conversations have no purpose other than to express negativity, waste time and make people feel bad. Immerse yourself in an environment of complaining, blaming, and gossip and at the end of the day, you'll feel completely exhausted and emotionally drained. You feel unproductive and have little to no energy to enjoy yourself and your family. Day after day, this adds up to stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue, resulting in poor morale, high use of sick time, high staff turnover and low productivity at work. This translates to lost profits for an organization. In addition, you suffer personal ramifications including poor relations with your spouse, children, and other important relationships. Your health might suffer physically and mentally as you become anxious, fearful, and/or depressed. You could have difficulty sleeping which has other detrimental effects in your life.

Change starts with you and a desire to be different. Each and every time you meet and greet someone, there is an opportunity for the conversation to be destructive or constructive. Learn to recognize destructive conversations, stop them, and participate in only constructive ones. Doing so will add more time to your day, improve your attitude, uplift your spirit, and help you to be more productive. On a larger scale, work environments that promote positive interactions are more profitable, have fewer use of sick time, fewer turnovers as well as more engaged, more productive and happier employees.

Change Starts with You

People aren't necessarily destructive on purpose. Often, this is all they know. It's become habit. Your fellow employees may have learned it from the culture itself by its tolerating negativity through the lack of action from leadership, or even worse, by managements' lead! If management is negative, then it

does make it difficult for you to make an impact towards change and it may mean that you are working in the wrong environment. Finding an environment where you can make a difference through positive efforts will have a huge impact on your level of happiness. However, if you are part of the problem, or if you believe that by learning new behaviors yourself and learning to speak up, then change starts with you.

Here are three steps to eliminating the destructive and having constructive conversations:

1. Do not tolerate destructive conversations.

Sensitize yourself to recognize when you are involved in a destructive conversation. Be aware of how you feel "do you feel excited or defeated?" Do you feel this person is honoring and respecting you? If not, stop the conversation. Two things you have to learn: the first is to say "no" to what doesn't work for you. By speaking up about what doesn't feel good for you, you teach the other person how you want to be treated. You are extending your boundaries. Remember that the other person doesn't know any better. They do what they do because it's what they know. If you say nothing, your silence gives them permission to continue. Second, teach them what you do want. Sometimes saying "no" to something isn't enough; you may need to explain what you want instead. For instance, "I don't want to speak about Jane because she is not here. I want to support you in communicating more effectively so tell me the problem itself and we'll see if we can figure out a good approach to handling the issue with Jane." In this way, you focus your conversation off the person, Jane, and the negative gossip, and instead focus on the problem which is how to get along with Jane. When you've instructed people enough times, they will come to understand that if all they want to do is tear someone down through gossip, then they won't be able to go to you! A byproduct of this is that you become trusted because people learn that you will not speak badly about people or allow others to do so in your presence. And in order to build a team, eliminating destructive conversations is extremely important to provide the safe space for trust to occur.

2. Only partake in constructive conversations.

Constructive conversations are positive, meaningful, and beneficial. This means that after you are finished, you feel good, perhaps better than before. Each conversation you have needs a purpose. What's the point? If you don't know and they are not sharing, then why are you participating? What are you gaining by being present? Take your time seriously by making every interaction a positive and productive one.

3. Celebrate each other.

You are wonderful and so is the person standing next to you. Get in the habit of looking for the best in others and for pointing out their greatness to them. People get so used to hearing the negatives that hearing positives is new and different and can feel uncomfortable at first. Give it time. Let people know what you enjoy or appreciate about them. It's amazing how good it feels and the impact it has when people share positive things about each other.

If you create an environment where negativity is not tolerated, where meetings and conversations take place with purpose and meaning, and where people praise and appreciate each other, then you start to bring out the best in people, productivity increases along with employee satisfaction. You also start to create fertile ground for trust to develop. People don't always know how to be great, but they want to be! Start by being great yourself and learn to be more masterful in your communication. Take care in what you feed your mind. You'll feel better and the people around you will be grateful for your lead.